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ABSTRACT

The Teaching Excellence Program, designed to promote faculty use of practice-centered inquiry, was conducted at a large research university (Ohio State). The program was based on a conceptualization of practice-centered inquiry that draws on action research, reflection-in-action, and action science ideas. Data collected throughout the program included tape recordings and field notes of faculty meetings, consultant notes on faculty activities, products generated by participants, organizational documents, and written evaluations of the program. A desire for collegial interchange on teaching was found to be a major aspect of the program. Participants were encouraged by an awareness that others cared about teaching in an environment where the reward system is not perceived as being supportive of teaching improvement. This paper provides an overview of the program, including a description of aims, format, and participants. The concerns expressed, topics explored, assistance and support needed, the evolving pattern of interactions, factors which supported or inhibited participation, and various effects of the program are summarized. (Author/CB)

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Dimensions of Faculty Participation in a Program Designed to Promote Practice-Centered Inquiry

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Abstract. The Teaching Excellence Program, a faculty development effort designed to promote inquiry into teaching practice, was conducted at a large research university. The program was based on a conceptualization of practice-centered inquiry that draws on action research, reflection-in-action, and action science ideas. It was conceived as both a faculty development program and a research project to explore the use of inquiry and reflection to improve practice.

Data collected throughout the program included tape recordings and field notes of faculty meetings, staff debriefing minutes, consultant notes on faculty activities, products generated by participants, organizational documents, and written evaluations of the program. Using qualitative research methods, data were sorted into categories, and emerging hypotheses were critiqued by three members of the project staff.

This overview includes a description of the program aims, format, and participants. The concerns expressed, topics explored, assistance and support needed, the evolving pattern of interactions, factors which supported or inhibited participation, and various effects of the program are summarized in this paper.

A desire for collegial interchange on teaching was a major aspect of the program. Participants were encouraged by an awareness that others cared about teaching in an environment where the reward system is not perceived as being supportive of teaching improvement.

Dimensions of Faculty Participation in a Program Designed to Promote Practice-Centered Inquiry

In many higher education settings, educators are currently asking what can be done to encourage teachers. How can they be supported to take teaching seriously, to examine the way classes are taught, and to maintain a concern about student engagement and learning? What can administrators and those in instructional development offices do in collaboration with faculty members to support teaching improvement? In one university, a project was conducted to help a group of faculty members focus on teaching by making use of action research, more broadly termed practice-centered inquiry in this program, to explore ways to improve their teaching.

This project or development effort designed to promote faculty use of practice-centered inquiry was called the Teaching Excellence Program. An overview of the program and a clarification of its broad aims will be discussed in this paper as a way to lead to an understanding of the various dimensions of faculty participation. The topics the faculty sought to explore, the kinds of assistance needed for their inquiry, the patterns of interaction that evolved, and various effects of the program will be summarized.

Program Description

The Context

Planning began six months prior to implementation with a program outline, followed by a commitment from the university's Office of Academic Affairs. Regular staff meetings occurred the summer before the 1985-86 academic year in which the Teaching Excellence Program took place. The major components of the program were fifteen biweekly, one and one-half-hour workshops for all participants and individual projects to be designed and carried out by each faculty member. The emphasis of the workshops, which were later called seminars, was to share information about teaching practices and to serve as resources to assist the participants in the assessment and development of their teaching. Individual projects were to

focus on particular aspects of teaching that each faculty member had selected for concentrated attention. Consultation was available to aid individuals in the design, implementation, and evaluation of their projects.

The five-member instructional development staff and their primary activities were: a project manager who was the liaison with the provost and responsible for recruitment; a project leader who conducted most of the meetings and prepared a concept paper to ground the inquiry; two staff members who implemented the planning and consulting aspects of the program; and a research associate who prepared a literature file of background materials. As the year evolved, the project leader, one staff member, and the research associate took on the primary responsibility for data collection and analysis of the program.

Participants were full-time members of the university faculty located at the Columbus campus of The Ohio State University. They were approached on an individual basis and invited to join the program. Five female and twelve male assistant, associate, and full professors comprised the list of faculty members. As Table 1 shows, a variety of academic areas in the arts and sciences and the "applied and professional" colleges were represented. Specifically, there were participants from 13 of the 18 degree-granting colleges with no more than two faculty from each college.

Faculty members were asked to make a "commitment of time and effort over a nine-month period necessary for the completion of a focused inquiry project aimed at course improvement and for actively participating in a bimonthly seminar aimed at developing methods and sharing resources among faculty in the program." Notes from a staff meeting prior to the first seminar included these words: "The level of faculty interest in participating and in talking with other faculty about teaching was unexpectedly high." Many of these faculty members had demonstrated a particular interest in their teaching or had been recognized by peers and students as continuing to develop their instruction. Many were involved in teaching some new or strategic course in their department, school, or college and had achieved recognition for their scholarship, creative activities, and teaching.

Table 1

Faculty Participants in Teaching Excellence Program

Department	*Faculty Rank*	*Male*	*Female*
Communication	Assistant	x	
Genetics	Assistant	x	
Nursing	Assistant		x
Journalism	Assistant		x
Subtotal	4	2	2
Landscape Architecture	Associate	x	
Health, Phys. Ed., Recreation & Family Medicine	Associate	x	
Physics	Associate	x	
History of Art	Associate		x
German	Associate		x
Subtotal	5	3	2
Law	Professor	x	
City & Regional Planning	Professor	x	
Veterinary Physiology/ Pharmacology	Professor	x	
Poultry Science	Professor	x	
Chemistry	Professor	x	
Music & Black Studies	Professor	x	
Agronomy	Professor	x	
Family Relations & Human Development	Professor		x
Subtotal	8	7	1
TOTALS	17	12	5

Purpose

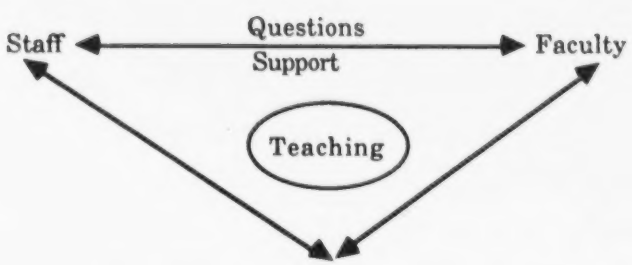
The aim of the Teaching Excellence Program was to focus on the improvement of teaching as enacted in a given course. It was not to assume that therapy was needed or could be provided but that support would aid professors in their inquiry to improve courses they teach. As shown in Figure 1, all activities–the group seminar discussions and individual projects and consultations–centered on teaching.

Not:

A Deficit or Therapy Model

Staff —(Changes suggested)→ Faculty

But:



Teaching Excellence Program
Seminars, Inquiry Projects, Consultations

Figure 1
Development Effort

The staff, through the development effort embodied in the Teaching Excellence Program, offered assistance, information, and support to the faculty. Various questions and issues about

teaching were raised by the participants, who were encouraged to use practice-centered inquiry to explore ways to improve their courses and their teaching.

The staff was continually concerned with what would best facilitate the process of development. These three basic principles undergirded the program:

1. Teaching and learning are the core activities in the university, which does not negate the importance of research, scholarship, advising, or service activities.
2. Teaching effectiveness is never in a static stage; knowledge about courses and professional development must be continuing.
3. There is a need for organizational support to encourage and foster development.

The primary purpose of the program–to support faculty in their practice-centered inquiry–included aims of promoting reflective thinking and professional growth, legitimizing their improvement efforts, helping them to understand their courses and teaching, and to clarify and extend their individual understanding. Possible benefits to the Instructional Development office, the research community, the students and university were secondary purposes of the program. The development office hoped to learn what might be done to improve its work to facilitate improvement in faculty and instructional development. It also hoped that research efforts might contribute knowledge about how faculty seek to improve teaching and how action research works in the university context. Students would benefit from improved instruction in undergraduate courses in a university committed to the importance of teaching.

Seminars

The bimonthly seminars began with an introduction to the program by the project manager followed by faculty self-introductions and expressions of particular interests. Because of scheduling difficulties, the participants were divided into two groups for the next four meetings. The discussions at these autumn sessions included reactions to the concept of practice-centered inquiry in a paper each had received, more about project interest, and ideas about

what makes a "good course good." Certain issues, such as the lack of rewards for teaching, often surfaced in the discussions. Winter quarter, with the two autumn groups again combined into one group of participants, began with a discussion of student evaluation of teaching–a concern of the faculty. There were two seminars–planned more specifically than the other sessions–that seemed particularly successful. One involved having everyone role play as departmental instructional improvement committee members. In the other session, group discussions about personal experiences with course improvement were followed by the plotting of commonalities.

During the spring quarter, the faculty members were divided into three groups that paralleled their areas of interest–curriculum, assessment, and technology groups. In these smaller group meetings, participants became more aware of the interests, projects, and expertise of others. The pattern of interaction that developed in the seminar and group meetings will be discussed in a later section. The Teaching Excellence Program ended with a reception, attended by the provost, where many participants talked about what the program had meant to them.

Issues and Problems of Teaching

Data, in the form of meeting notes collected from the seminars, showed that certain kinds of issues and problems of teaching were of concern to the faculty members. Their questions can be grouped into the following three general areas of concern: (a) issues of responsibility and authority, (b) issues of professional knowledge expected to be available in education, and (c) pragmatic issues.

Faculty members from various departments were concerned about the lack of student preparation for what was needed to succeed in university courses. Many talked about not being able to do what they would like to with their teaching because students did not have the needed background knowledge and experience. Students' inadequate verbal skills and poor understanding of grammar caused problems for professors in journalism and German classes, for example. A physics professor asked whose responsibility it was to teach math skills to

students at the university. Several asked: Who is to blame and who is responsible for remediation?

Many professors had questions they hoped could be answered by those in education. They wondered how basic skills could most effectively be taught to young adults, how to design tests to correspond with learning objectives, whether a professor could design individualized learning activities for large enrollment courses, and what should be included and what left out of a given curriculum. Some faculty members said they were participating in the program because they expected educators might have some answers for them. They hoped there were some things that they could learn from educational research. They wondered, "Are there answers to this in educational literature?"

There were also pragmatic issues concerning a certain action they planned. "Will it work?" they asked. Questions about what is problematic in labs or about whether a certain course would change students' level of ethical or cross-cultural awareness were issues of practice raised by the faculty.

Faculty Participation

Topics to Explore

Some of these issues and problems of teaching led to the inquiry projects undertaken by the faculty. Topics explored about certain teaching practices in diverse academic areas can be grouped together under the following broad questions:

1. Why do I do what I do?
    a. Why use labs in biology?
    b. Is CAI used in landscape architecture to help students or because the challenge of making new designs is enjoyable?
    c. Why use group projects in an ads class?
    d. Will technical terms in music history classes confuse nonmajors?

2. What works best to promote student learning?
    a. Group assignments or individual projects in journalism?
    b. Slides of art or the art object?
    c. Lecture or more interactive teaching methods in a high-enrollment human development course?
    d. Lecture or experiential approach to learning about cancer prevention and detection?
    e. CAI with color graphic or lecture in a soils class?
    f. Does a CAI tutorial affect learning in German?
3. How do I evaluate student learning, use of material, or performance?
    a. Will nurses' level of ethical self-awareness change after taking a course in bioethics?
    b. Can a behavioral contract used in grading be streamlined without sacrificing quality?
    c. Can multiple choice exams be as "good" as essay exams in a law course?
    d. What effect does the amount and kind of exam preparation have on exam performance?

Information, Assistance, Support Needed

The individual consultation provided by the development staff was one of the major components of the Teaching Excellence Program. The list of faculty participants was divided by the two staff members who shared the responsibility for being the contact person who would provide information and assistance. The specific kinds of support that were provided varied, of course, according to the nature of the project and the point attained in the research process.

Information of a technical nature was needed for research design, computer-assisted research, survey construction, and data interpretation. Consultants assisted in conducting literature reviews, acted as liaisons between faculty members and others on campus with

similar interests, helped find and evaluate instructional materials, critiqued grading and testing procedures, and made recommendations after observing classes.

The most important function of the Teaching Excellence Program seemed to be to legitimize–to give support for improving teaching. Exemplary remarks were: "I can't effect these changes unless I have something to back (me) up," and ". . . by virtue of being in the program, I knew that I would have time to do something relative to teaching (and) couple it with educational research." Faculty members found support from hearing others, whom they respected as knowledgeable and capable scholars, talking about similar issues and problems. They were strengthened by the awareness that others cared about their teaching in an environment where the reward system did not support teaching improvement. They valued the camaraderie, the sharing of ideas and concerns, and the opportunity to voice problematic issues, discuss teaching, and become more aware of the perspectives of others.

Patterns of Interaction

How did participants learn from each other? What kinds of interactions took place when the faculty met as a group? An analysis of the data from the seminars and small group meetings showed that various types of interactions occurred. In earlier, larger meetings, discussions were often characterized by polite responses or elaborations of someone else's remarks, as distinguished from later interaction such as suggestions offered and taken, references given, ideas critiqued, and questions asked. In the small group meetings that occurred in the spring, questions went beyond a critique or extension to a desire for information exchange. The difference is shown in Figure 2.

The interest, respect, support, and desire for information was apparent in later meetings. Aware that the questions were sincere and not criticism, faculty members would readily answer. In the smaller group meetings, clarifying questions were asked that led to making comparisons, probing answers, and reacting to common concerns. The earlier interactions, when a question was asked to critique or a statement was made to evaluate,

seemed to show an interest in replication–do as I do. However, when questions were asked with the desire for information, the response was facilitative. In such mutual contributions, the initiator and respondent often contributed to each other in a mutual transaction (Lock Land, 1973).

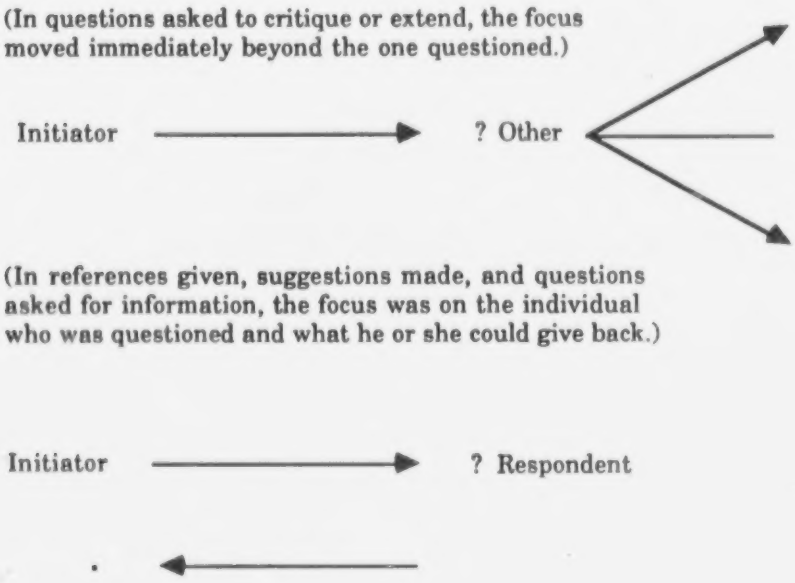

(In questions asked to critique or extend, the focus moved immediately beyond the one questioned.)
Initiator
? Other
(In references given, suggestions made, and questions asked for information, the focus was on the individual who was questioned and what he or she could give back.)
Initiator
? Respondent

Figure 2
Interactions

This climate for sharing of information, the process of being affected by and also influencing others, was built on the discovery of commonality that resulted from the earlier seminar discussions. Participants seemed to thrive on the opportunity to, not only learn more for their own teaching practices, but be able to contribute meaningful information to others.

Supports and Constraints

Faculty participation in the Teaching Excellence Program seminars and in the individual inquiry projects was influenced by many factors. Data from the seminars and group meetings and from consultation notes show that participants felt that there were conditions of the professoriate that seemed to inhibit efforts to improve teaching; far fewer comments suggested facilitative conditions.

Facilitative conditions for work on projects aimed at improving teaching included, according to the faculty participants, support in the form of funding or sabbatical leave for this kind of work. The technical information and psychological assistance provided by the development staff were facilitative forces. Some participants were encouraged by the possibility of publishing in a professional journal about work on teaching improvement. A very positive force in bringing about change would be the personal gratification derived from seeing students grow and from knowing a course had been improved.

The inhibiting factors were many and could not be attributed only to the uncertainty about human subjects research skills expressed by several participants. The universal view of the faculty was that the reward system in the university does not support professors' investing time and effort in improving their teaching, especially in the case of the untenured. The sense was that teaching is regarded as a second-class activity, as Cross (1985) discussed. Professors have very demanding schedules, a situation that makes the work to improve teaching an "add-on." Without a program such as the Teaching Excellence Program, there is no time slot for such work. The reward for the time and effort invested is questionable, and the risk is great. Some participants thought it would not only be risky, but also unethical to try changes that might not work. Uncertainty about how much time would be involved and what secondary effects might emerge add to the constraints, combined with a lack of support from colleagues, including administrators. The length of time it takes to produce changes, especially when new problems and unexpected consequences are common, is inhibiting. Problems that occurred for some

professors included lack of resources and changes in technology–especially serious in the realm of infrastructure equipment.

Avoidance seemed to be a major constraint to focusing on practice issues of teaching. During seminar discussions, the faculty repeatedly talked about context issues or organizational barriers (promotion and tenure, large class size, lack of entry skills of students) instead of practice issues at a level of personal engagement. Basic beliefs about teaching or learning , such as what knowledge is of most worth or what the professor's role is in promoting learning, were rarely addressed. The question, as asked by the staff, remains: Is this constraint that stems from a feeling that teaching is a private matter due to the nature of college teaching and the persons who do it?

Feedback and response are necessary if changes are to occur. According to one of the participants, even when one publishes about teaching, there is no feedback from peers or from others who may be interested. He said, "If someone would call me and let me know they liked it, maybe that would be useful for tenure and promotion." Lock Land (1973) stated that a "gene" cannot know it is good until it is tested in the system. One might say that faculty cannot know an idea is good until it is tested in the system. The response or feedback professors look for from their environments (their system–classes, departments, universities) is essential for growth, for change, to occur. There was an example of an active participant in the program whose initial plans to change labs were stalled because he realized that lack of departmental financial support for the labs would prevent any meaningful change. Conversely, another professor responded to favorable feedback from students concerning changes he had made and continued his new practices. As our project leader observed, feedback from the association with others interested in improving teaching seems to be hard to come by–an explanation for why the appreciation of collegiality and resultant networking from the development program were so valuable to the participants.

Discussion

Effects of the Program

Specific examples can be cited to document some concrete effects of the program. Projects resulted in changes in teaching practices such as the following: revised superelevation modules used in a landscape architecture class, minor revisions made in biology labs, a new course outline developed for a music history class, departmental documents written for art history and journalism, and several abstracts to be presented or written for publication .

There were also effects of the program that may be far reaching but are certainly more difficult to document. Six months after the scheduled program concluded, participants spoke of a raised consciousness about their teaching leading to feeling more confident and being more apt to question and seek feedback. Some faculty noted more departmental awareness and said policy changes had occurred since their participation in the program. The generation of ideas and stimulation of interests have led some faculty to continue cross-campus contacts that began with the collegiality of the development program. The program motivated one professor "to do some things she had been wanting to do for a long time." Another said she has become more aware of the impact that the kinds of practices she employs have on her teaching.

The participants in the Teaching Excellence Program seemed to genuinely care about teaching but did not always perceive themselves in a position to concentrate on it in an environment "where teaching and pedagogical ability are not highly valued. . ." (Astin, 1985, p. 132). The help provided, interaction encouraged, and feedback offered all seemed necessary for faculty to effect changes in their teaching practices. Their participation was also affected by an individual sense of autonomy and locus of control–a dimension of the complex situation that was also necessary to liberate faculty to move beyond perceived constraints and inhibiting factors (Mauksch, 1980).

Conclusion

In assessing the effects of the development program, staff members had to remind themselves that effectiveness should not only be judged by specific, concrete outputs or products. Astin (1985), in discussing higher education, would have educational effectiveness be judged in terms of talent development, not outputs or expenditures. Such a stance seems as applicable to a faculty and instructional development program as it is to assessing effectiveness in an individual classroom or in the larger university setting. An aim of a development program of this type must be to promote a "respectful and informed attention to teaching as more than an acquiring of knowledge that may be usefully passed on and more than a utilitarian task that subsidizes research" (Eble, 1984, p. 26). Such encouragement is vital for faculty to center their inquiry on their teaching practices.

Our continuing probe into the usefulness of this particular development effort must be paradigmatic of what teachers consider as they research into their practices. Solutions to problems of teaching must be interposed onto complex patterns of human interaction (Applebee, 1986). Educationally useful research includes studies that result in questions that take on an importance beyond immediate, simple answers.

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